The Advocate

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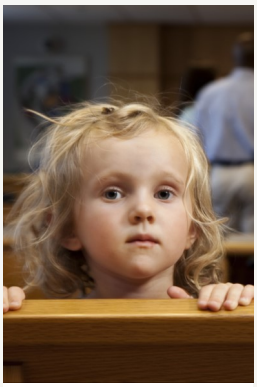
Advocating During Covid-19



CASA Child in the courtroom.

Throughout this unsure time of the Covid-19 Pandemic, Family Advocates would like to assure our donors, volunteers, families, and friends that we are doing everything we can to continue to advocate for our youth and children.

Our volunteers and staff have become very creative in adhering to the Stay at Home Order issued by Governor Holcomb while being there for the youth and children in our programs. Technology has been a wonderful tool to help accomplish this task. CASA (Court Appointed Special Advocates) & CYA (Court Youth Advocates) have been using video calls to continue the connection. One volunteer has been reading stories to her CASA children over Skype. A CYA volunteer had the same book sent to himself and his CYA youth so they can both read the story and discuss over the phone.

During a time of stress and the future so unknown, Family Advocates would like the children and youth in our program to know their volunteer will always be there for them, even when it has to be virtually. Staying connected with children who have been abused and neglected and are at high risk is a top priority.

- April - Child Abuse Prevention Month
- Volunteer Appreciation Brunch - June 27, 2020
- Fall Gala - November 13, 2020

A Letter from our CEO

April is Child Abuse Prevention Month, a month we set aside to inform the public about the need to report suspected abuse and neglect. But this April, at-risk children are at most risk than ever before.

Millions of people are staying home to prevent the spread of the coronavirus. However, for some, staying home causes an increase risk of danger. Children are facing an increased risk of abuse and neglect, but many of these cases may go unreported while schools are closed.

Parents are losing their jobs and struggling to provide for their families. Adults are also facing a greater risk of domestic violence, which is traumatic for their victims and their children, as children are at home witnessing it. Many mental health services and child advocacy services have resorted to video chatting, phone calls, or messaging instead of meeting in person.

Our Court Appointed Special Advocate volunteers are not able to check in with these kids face-to-face and we are worried that the higher stress in homes can lead to more abuse. Volunteers and staff are getting creative by connecting virtually with children and caregivers, ensuring they have information about food pickup sites and sending craft and game ideas to keep them busy and connected.

Every April, Family Advocates celebrates the selfless commitment our volunteers make to abused and neglected children and at-risk youth every day. Even during this crisis, they are there for their kids - even if it is only virtually. Our volunteers, staff, and supporters continue to ensure these children are not forgotten while isolated during the pandemic. I am continually humbled and grateful for their commitment to children, the community, and Family Advocates.

Karen Biernacki, CEO
Family Advocates

Family Advocates 30th Anniversary

It's amazing how time flies when you are in the business of advocating for children and families. This year, Family Advocates is proud and excited to be celebrating our 30th Anniversary with all of our friends and supporters.

Family Advocates began as The La Porte County CASA Program, Inc. in 1990 providing Court Appointed Special Advocate volunteers for abused and neglected children who were adjudicated Children in Need of Services through the court. The CASA movement began in 1977 in Seattle, Washington under the direction of Judge David W. Soukup. In 1982, legislation was created in Indiana that defined the role of the CASA (Court Appointed Special Advocate) in relationship to the juvenile court proceedings. In 1990, La Porte County trained its first volunteers.

In 1999, the La Porte County CASA Program and Swanson Center entered into an agreement to create a supervised visitation and safe exchange program in the old Swanson Center outpatient building at 1005 Michigan Avenue in La Porte. Harmony House opened for business in September to provide a home where families could continue birthday celebrations and Holiday traditions. By 2019, over 50,000 hours of supervised visitation has been provided to non-custodial parents and their children in La Porte and Michigan City.

In 2004, the La Porte County CASA Program, Inc. and Harmony House of La Porte County, Inc. became Harmony House/CASA Program of La Porte County, Inc.

2012 began the development of a volunteer program for youth who are delinquent and by 2013 the first volunteers were trained as CYA (Court Youth Advocate) Volunteers. These volunteers advocate for at-risk youth who has committed a crime or a status offense and the court finds that an advocate is needed. The CYA continues the relationship as a mentor once the youth successfully completes their terms of probation.

In January 2015, Harmony House/CASA Program of La Porte County, Inc. became Family Advocates. The mission being Family Advocates is an independent organization advocacy and intervention agency working for the best interest of at-risk children and families.

Over the last 30 years, 422 CASA & CYA volunteers spent approximately 1,448,443 hours advocating for children and youth in La Porte County. Harmony House has spent 55,133 hours supervising visits so families can continue growing their bonds.

Family Advocates would like to expand services and ensure every child in need has a voice and every child has an opportunity to have safe, quality time with their parent. We invite the community

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Volunteer Appreciation Brunch

Every year Family Advocates spends the month of April celebrating our amazing volunteers who give their time and hearts to help at-risk children and youth in La Porte County. This April, due to the Coronavirus Pandemic and the need to keep everyone safe and well, we have had to push back our celebration, however we plan to have our event on June 27, 2020. Our Volunteer Appreciation Brunch will recognize all of the volunteers and celebrate both our CASA and CYA Volunteer of the Year.

The theme this year is Providing Hope Today for a Better Tomorrow. We look very forward to getting out and celebrating the selfless acts all of our volunteers perform every day of the year to help the children we serve.

PROVIDING HOPE TODAY FOR A BETTER TOMORROW.

Recognizing Volunteer - Leigh Morris

I haven't actually taken the time to list them, but I think I've probably had over 100 volunteer roles over my lifetime, but none of them were as meaningful—or as personally impactful—as my role as a Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA). CASA programs are the only volunteer organization directly connected to the court. After training is completed, they are appointed and sworn in by a judge to speak for a child who would otherwise not be heard.

These children are often abused and neglected, and they desperately the support of an adult who truly cares about them and stays with them for the length of their court case. In Indiana, they're re called Child in Need of Services (CHINS). The CASA volunteer provides a judge with objective information about the child to help the court make a sound decision about that child's future. The CASA volunteer makes recommendations to the judge and follows through on the case until it is permanently resolved. They advocate for the child's best interests and help them have a safe and permanent home as soon as possible. In my experience CASA I've seen first -hand what a difference that can make in the child's life experience.

-Leigh Morris

FORMER VOLUNTEER LEIGH MORRIS

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CARES Act Charitable Donation Deduction Change

Senate passed the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act. Included in the tax changes is a new above-the-line deduction for charitable contributions specifically for taxpayers who do not itemize (i.e., those who claim the standard deduction). These taxpayers may deduct from their adjusted gross income (AGI) up to $300 of qualified charitable contributions. This provision only applies to tax year 2020.

Charitable Donation Deduction Changes:

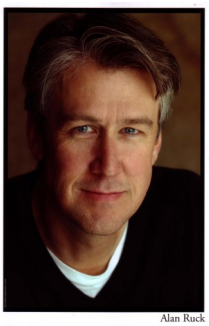
- A special above-the-line deduction can be taken for qualified charitable contributions up to $300 for tax year 2020.
- Ordinarily, if an individual didn't itemize their deductions, they would not receive a tax benefit for a charitable contribution.
- The above-the-line deduction now provides up to a $300 deduction for otherwise nondeductible charitable contributions due to the taxpayer not itemizing.
- For those who do itemize their deductions, qualified cash charitable contributions can be deducted up to 100% of adjusted gross income (up from 60% of adjusted gross income).

VIP Event

We are so excited to announce a special guest for this years Anniversary Gala - Alan Ruck. Many people will remember Alan Ruck as Cameron Frye, Ferris Bueller's hypochondriac best friend in *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* and currently plays the role of the oldest son, Connor Roy, in the HBO series *Succession*.

Mr. Ruck believes in giving back to the community and we are elated that he has chosen to help us celebrate our 30th Anniversary.

Information will be coming soon how to get tickets to this event.



Alan Ruck

MOVIE & TELEVISION ACTOR, ALAN RUCK

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WE ARE ON THE WEB WWW.LPFAMILYADVOCATES.COM

OUR MISSION:
FAMILY ADVOCATES IS AN INDEPENDENT ORGANIZATION ADVOCACY AND INTERVENTION AGENCY WORKING FOR THE BEST INTEREST OF AT-RISK CHILDREN AND FAMILIES.

Family Advocates Stories

CASA volunteer Kelli Tanger reported about her recent visit with her CASA at her new placement in Marion County. *Jenny (her CASA child) was recently moved from her pre-adoptive placement. She had been in this home, expecting to have finally found her "forever home" as she put it. She even had a new name picked out. But something happened and the family asked for her to be removed. This was one of many moves since she was detained nearly three years ago. She was placed with a distant relative, whom she did not really know. Kelli spoke with her placement who informed her that *Jenny had already had plans on where she was going to take Kelli when she came to visit. This was before she even knew Kelli was coming to see her.

In her report, Kelli wrote: *Jenny went to an ice cream place there and was saying that was where she was going to take me when I visit. This was before I even set up a visit or anything- that is the power of a CASA. The kids rely on your stability, and it was no question to her that I would show up even though she moved again.

*Name changed for confidentiality.

CYA volunteer, Daryl Penfold, decided to order a fun book and have it sent to her youth. The two will read the book and have fun discussing it via phone. She will be able to keep a connection with her youth during this time of quarantine.

Harmony House conducted a visit with the *Johnson Family via the online service, Zoom. *Ally Johnson, age 4, was so excited to see her mom over the Zoom app after not being able to visit for a week due to the mandate from Governor Holcomb. Harmony House staff was able to have all parties sign in on the Zoom app and they could interact while staff is able to monitor the visit and step in if needed. *Ally sat on the floor in front of the iPad talking to her Mom very excitedly. She was able to tell her Mom all of the activities she has been doing to keep herself busy since preschool has been cancelled. After the visit was over the Mom thanked the Harmony House staff and said this has been so hard being away from her daughter, but she is so thankful she can see her daughter while they talked.

*Name changed for confidentiality.

Reach for the Stars

FALL GALA - REACH FOR THE STARS

Every year, Family Advocates holds a fall gala to raise funds and celebrate accomplishments. This year we celebrate 30 years of taking care of the at-risk children, youth, and families in La Porte County.

This is just too exciting to miss! Come join us on November 6th as we celebrate 30 years of advocating for children and families and be part of our journey as we look to the future to assure every child has the opportunity to "Reach for the Stars.

Family Advocates

CASA
Court Appointed Special Advocates
FOR CHILDREN

harmony house

CYA
Court Youth Advocate Program